

Killing in the name of God

Tom Stuckey

Almost to the day two years ago I was invited to preach in the theological department of Durham University. I felt it to be an honour until I heard what I had to preach about. During that spring term visiting preachers were assigned passages from the book of Judges. Now Judges tells exciting stories of Gideon and Sampson; my Sunday School heroes. I now view them differently. They were religious thugs who killed in the name of God.

The Department had given me chapter 4. It is the story of Barak and of how Sisera, the enemy, commander was killed by Jael who invited him into her tent, fed him and when he was asleep drove a tent peg through his head. It is really horrible incident.¹

I can understand why Christians and non Christians are nauseated by this terrible stuff. In preparation for my sermon I spent months studying the whole book of Judges. My conclusions were:

- First (and sadly) the book is relevant because those ancient stories of tribal conflict resonate with what is happening today in places like Syria.
- Second the book shows how ethnic and religious disagreements can so escalate as to plunge a whole country into anarchy where everyone ‘does what was right in their own eyes’.
- Those who take the sword not only perish by the sword but shape the memories of future generations so that cycles of violence infect their children and their children’s children.

HUMAN NATURE

We in the Britain do not live on the edge of an abyss like the people in Syria. We take it for granted that tomorrow there will be electricity, food in the shops and that if there is some crisis the Government will step into help. This is because we are the fortunate inheritors of the Enlightenment Tradition of reason, democracy and education.

¹I was more fortunate in my choice of text than the bishop who had to preach the week before on Ehud. His story was about the difficulty Ehud had in killing Eglon because he had such a fat belly.

This has not always been so. Having just read a history of the Wars of the Roses.² I was reminded that we too have had our periods of anarchy as powerful warlords struggled for supremacy. During the Tudor Period we had our own wars of religion with their tortures, violations and burnings. Then we had the civil war where religion and politics again proved to be a toxic mix. When we look back at our own history we see that same dangerous toxic mix of power, religion and politics which has led our own ancestors to kill each other. Why all this killing? Are we not made in the image of God?³

I used to believe that the 'image of God' in us could not be totally erased. That was before I visited Kosovo and saw the gas chambers in Auschwitz. Although made in the image of God, there lodges in all of us the capacity for self-deception and violence. In my book *The Wrath of God Satisfied?* I write:

Western Christians, the product of democratic liberalism, identify with victims but leave their own potential for violence and hatred intact. The idea that we might catch a glimpse of our own reflection in the face of a Nazi guard is a terrifying thought. We therefore protect ourselves from our own capacity for violence by describing evil as something alien and foreign to us. It is not.⁴

Our human nature is such that in conditions of severe trauma uncontrollable rage can explode from within our inner depths. It can happen when we least expect it. Psalm 137 'By the waters of Babylon' ends with the expressed wish to smash babies against a rock. Then at the end of the beautiful Psalm 139 which speaks of God's wonder and love we have the words 'O that you would kill the wicked O God'. We humans are not always what we seem.

RELIGION AND VIOLENCE

Richard Dawkins has argued that religion is the primary cause of violence. There is certainly no denying that religion can be a force for evil, but it can also be a force for good. Keith Ward, in his book *Is Religion Dangerous?* concludes

² Peter Ackroyd: *The History of England*. Volume 1; Macmillan 2011.

³ I remember a commander from the SAS addressing some a group of Forces Chaplains. He was asked what would happen in London if all the utilities and electrical systems in the world collapsed. He predicted that within a month chaos and anarchy would reign. The thugs and criminal gangs would seize control. If order was to be restored they would have to be killed. That was the job of the SAS.

⁴ Tom Stuckey: *The Wrath of God Satisfied?* WIPF & STOCK 2012 p.78.

that it is human beings, whether religious or not, who are dangerous.⁵ Over and against Dawkins one has only to look at the French revolution or the horrors of the Russian Gulags to see that atheism spawns violence.

It can be argued that from the example of the American Civil War that violence springs from the clash of ideologies, in that case slavery over and against freedom. We are back to that toxic mix of ideology and politics. Does this mean that religion plays no part in acts of killing? Not so. Religion cannot be removed from this cocktail of violence.

The very first murder recorded in the Bible is cast within a religious framework. The Hebrew word for Cain means “bring forth”. Cain, the firstborn son, inherited productive land. The Hebrew for Abel means “nothing” or “vapor”. The two did not start equal. Cain had fertile land; Abel had nothing and was forced to become a wandering nomad. Their wish to offer God the best sacrifice drove them to compete. When they brought their gifts, God took Abel’s side—the side of the disadvantaged. This provoked an explosive reaction in Cain who, like a wild beast enticed Abel in a field and murdered him (Gen 4:6-8).

Rene Girard,⁶ the French historian, anthropologist and philosopher (b.1923), uses this story to argue that violence arises when humans compete in their pursuit of a single goal. Mutual competition and rivalry can become so intense that the one may attempt to totally eliminate the other. Cain according to Girard was not only the first murderer but the founder of the urban culture of violence (Gen 4:17). Violence spawns more and more violence which runs on into future generations.

Why doesn’t violence escalate to such a level that we human beings destroy ourselves? He explains that we re-direct our anger onto victims who become scapegoats chosen because they are different. The Jews have always been picked on. In the Middle Ages when panics occurred, lepers, foreigners, wise women, and the disabled were targeted. Communities transfer their hostilities on to victims who are killed. According to Girard it is therefore not religion that gives rise to violence rather violence gives rise to religion.

⁵ Keith Ward: *Is Religion Dangerous?* Oxford Lion, p.39.

⁶ Girard. *I see Satan Fall like Lightning.* p.24f.

Violence exists because we as social animals find our identity in groups. Religion serves the additional function of bonding the group together. Hitler was able to beguile and unite the German people during the 1930s by making Nazism a religion. He adopted paraphernalia of religion; powerful symbols and myths, a utopian vision, a message of divine destiny, salvation from guilt, a demand for sacrifice and of course by making the Jew the scapegoat.

Groups will fight each other over territory. A group will fight other groups for food, for honour and for the resources they lack. Individuals we will demonstrate altruism within their own group but are suspicious and ungenerous to those who belong to another group, particularly if they have a different type of religion. In times of scarcity this suspicion can turn so nasty that genocide is actively contemplated. In conditions of appalling need individuals within a group will even turn on each other.⁷

Girard suggests that the ritual blood sacrifice of a scapegoat victim is a further way of binding a group together. Although the metaphor of sacrifice may be unpalatable today, the smoking crematoria of Auschwitz and the 1994 bloodbath in Rwanda⁸ are savage reminders that powerful elites maintain their hold on power by creating victims. The bloody killings, burnings, and destruction of those judged to be different is a sub-text of human history serving to renew the social cohesion of the group which regards itself as superior. The Balkans conflict is a case in point.

Girard believes that dark forces of evil can hide inside a religion. These are personified in the person of Satan. Satan keeps the wheels of violence spinning. He sustains himself as a parasite imitating God in a perverse and confusing manner. He persuades us that “good” violence is the answer to “bad violence”. The US and UK Governments assumed this when invading Iraq.⁹ Evil flourishes because it hides beneath the good intentions of the participants. The cross of

⁷ When Jerusalem was under siege in July AD 70 surrounded by the well equipped Roman Army led by Titus, terrible atrocities were committed within the city. Armed gangs killed each other for food. Neighbours denounced each other as hoarders and traitors. ‘Madness seized the city’ says Josephus. ‘The streets were heaped with dead bodies but they still killed each other.’ No wonder Jesus lamented over the city!

⁸ Mary Grey, *To Rwanda and Back*. London: DLT 2007

⁹ Charles Reed. *Just War*. London: SPCK, 104-108.

Christ is significant because it reveals how violence can hide itself in the machinations of religion and power.¹⁰

IN THE NAME OF GOD

According to Jonathan Sacks ‘the crimes of religion have one thing in common; they involve making God in our image instead of letting God make us in his.’¹¹ When human beings believe themselves driven to kill in the name of God, they are not invoking God but rather their own distorted image of God.

Karl Barth says religion can be a form of unbelief.¹² Using labels to explain God produces false gods. Thomas Aquinas, realizing this, defined God by what he is not. The result was 60 volumes of theology. The slogan *There Is No God*— which appeared on some London buses in 2009— was not as negative as some might suppose. The first Christians were called “atheists” because they did not have the religious paraphernalia of temple, sacrifices, images and priests. The very word ‘God’ suggests an object, something which can be defined and examined. The Old Testament word for ‘God’ as far as grammar is concerned is not a noun but a verb which could translated as ‘I am’ or ‘I will be’, or ‘I am becoming.’¹³ God is a dynamic, transcendent, unknowable mystery. Every attempt to find God is like trying to catch the waves of the sea with a fishing net. Any claim to do things ‘in the name of God’ steers very close to idolatry.

Does this mean we can say nothing about God? At the heart of the World’s Great Faiths is the idea of creation and revelation. We cannot find God but he can find us. This is an affirmation which lies at the root of the three great Abrahamic Faiths. But is God love?

Even though the message and the fact of Jesus has been shaped and distorted over the centuries by cultural forces, power struggles, political ideologies, philosophical systems, patriarchal oppression, racism and sexism there can be no denying Our Lord’s ethic of love. ‘Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you.’ We often forget that Paul, who is often wrongly blamed for distorting the message of Jesus was once a man who ‘killed in the name of

¹⁰ Boersma: *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross*, Grand Rapids 2004, p.139.

¹¹ Jonathan Sacks: *Not in his Name* H&S 2015, p.265.

¹² Karl Barth: *Church Dogmatics 1/2*, T & T Clark, p.303.

¹³ Janet Soskice: *The Kindness of God*, OUP 2007, p.14.

God'. We forget that he became a passionate advocate of love and peace. Furthermore he deepened and extended the ethic of Jesus and in his mission on the world worked to end all forms of discrimination between Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free.

In Romans 12 after his exhortations to love and be patient in suffering he commands 'Beloved, never avenge yourselves but leave room for the wrath of God for it is written 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay' says the Lord. If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if thirsty, give them something to drink.'

The mention of 'wrath' in God is something which most Christians find unpalatable. This is because we understand 'wrath' as anger as vindictive indignation, uncontrollable rage, or destructive vengeance. God's wrath bears no resemblance to anything human.

The Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf from his personal experience of the horrors of the 1990s Balkans conflict says:

I used to think that wrath was unworthy of God. Isn't God love? My resistance to the idea of God's wrath was as a casualty of war in the former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come where over 200,000 people were killed and over 3,000,000 were displaced and my people brutalized beyond imagination, and I could not imagine God not being angry. How does God react to such carnage? By refusing to condemn the bloodbath? I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who *wasn't* wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful *because* God is love.' ¹⁴

Paul in Romans argues that human beings keep creating their own images and understandings of the invisible and mysterious God. When they do this they 'exchange truth for a lie'. Referring specifically to the cultural situation of his time he argued that this inevitably leads to moral disintegration in which envy, murder, strife and deceit become accepted and normal practices of behaviour. Divine wrath is the action of a Holy God who:

...hands us over to become the playthings of the false gods and the delusions we have embraced (Rom 1:24-25). In one sense the dark powers

¹⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge*, Grand Rapids 2005, p.138

are God's instruments of justice, in another they are his enemies, since they violate his rule and deface his image.¹⁵

When we love our enemies 'we heap burning coals on their heads' Thus God consigns those who commit violent actions to be consumed in the fires of their own violence. There is a further irony because the person who kills in the name of God will not be able to limit his own capacity for destruction but will often turn on his own people so sabotaging the very cause for which he gives his life. In Girard words 'Satan is no longer able to limit his capacity for destruction. Satan in destroying his own kingdom, and he will destroy himself.'¹⁶

But there is a further dimension here because we believe that Jesus Christ is the great scapegoat of all history. He breaks the cycles of violence as the wickedness of all time finds its focus in him. Through God's atoning action in and through Christ on the cross the sum total of all sin, wickedness and violence are absorbed and swallowed up into the very Trinity itself. No wonder there is pain at the heart of God. The wrath of God is but the shadow side of that pain.

SIBLING RIVALRY AND FUNDAMENTALISM

The book of Genesis is a series of stories about sibling rivalry. We have already noted the clash between Cain and Abel. The legacy of sibling rivalry is perpetrated in the children and grandchildren of Abraham. Isaac is chosen while Isaac's half brother Ishmael is rejected. Isaac has two sons Jacob and Esau but Jacob robs Esau of his birthright. Jacob's special treatment of his son Joseph provokes such jealousy in the other brothers that they seek to kill him. These rejected sons form families of their own as inheritors of the promise given to Abraham, the promise that they will become great nations; the promise of the same patch of land! The dynamic of conflict between Jews and Arabs is written into their histories.¹⁷

¹⁵ Stuckey, *ibid.* p.101

¹⁶ Girard, *ibid.* p.142.

¹⁷ Jonathan Sacks in his important book *Not in God's Name* (H&S 2015) re-examines the stories of sibling rivalry recorded in the book of Genesis and challenges these texts of selectivism and Paul's use of them, e.g. 'Jacob I loved but Esau I hated.' (Gen 25.23; Mal 1.2). He re-examines these Genesis stories demonstrating that even though, in the Bible, God choose, God does NOT reject. In the Joseph story, with which Genesis ends, Sacks describes it as a process of Reconciliation. I suggest that what is going on here is not unlike the Truth and Reconciliation process adopted in post-Apartheid South Africa.

The appearance of Christians, who according to Paul are the new spiritual inheritors of Abraham's promise, triggers a new sibling rivalry. When Christians are driven from the synagogues the friendly relationship between Christians and Jews comes to an end and anti-Semitism enters the pages of the New Testament.

In 630 Mohammad captured Mecca and not only expelled the Jews but beheaded 700 of the men. Islam becomes a new inheritors of Abraham's promise both of greatness and of land. Mohammed's successors having pacified Arabia and challenged the Byzantine and Persian Empires focused on the conquest of Palestine. Their goal is Jerusalem.

Jerusalem for Jews, Christians and Muslims is regarded as the religious and apocalyptic centre of the world. For 1000 years Jerusalem had been exclusively Jewish; for about 400 years Christian; and for 1,300 years Islamic. Every one of these great faiths have had to secure Jerusalem with the sword.¹⁸

The capture of Jerusalem in 1967 changed the political world. The victory of the a small Jewish democracy over and against the Soviet backed Arab legions was interpreted by Jews of the Diaspora as a call to return to Zion. Some even contemplated the rebuilding of the temple. For Christian evangelicals in America it heralded the apocalyptic Last Days of the Second Coming. In the years which followed Jerusalem has continued to expand its borders. Initially Palestinians and many Israelis worked alongside each other but that period of goodwill was short-lived. In 1982 an Israeli reservist shot two Arabs in a rampage on Temple Mount. Killing began on both sides. In 1987 Hamas was formed dedicated to jihad; the destruction of Israel. The suicide bombing began and the Israeli responses has become increasingly disproportionate. Since then all peace initiatives have failed.¹⁹

Both Muslims and Jews have unimpeachable historical claims to the city with theologies to back those claims. However when theologies countenance killing in the name of God then that God becomes a man-made-construct. Such a God has little to do with the mysterious being who hides behind the pages of

¹⁸ Jerusalem's history is a chronicle of settlers, colonists and pilgrims; Arabs, Jews, Christian Armenians, Russians, Turks, Indians, Iranians, Kurds, the list is endless. There have been short period when these three inheritors of Abraham's promise have been able to live in relative peace together though the Jews have always been marginalized.

¹⁹ Simon S Montefiore, *Jerusalem: A Biography*, Phoenix, 201, p.404f

Scripture. A theology of a God who inspires killing is a theology which has been constructed by lifting out certain texts from the Bible and the Koran. Such a God has been packaged within a fundamentalist ideology.

Today in Jerusalem religious fundamentalism has now taken over. Both sides deny the history of the other. In this polarised conflict the superpowers of the US and Russia have taken sides. Islam has become a world force to be reckoned with. The irony is that this power has been fuelled and paid for because of the Western demand for oil.

FUTURE HOPE?

But killing in the name of God is not the road to salvation but rather to self annihilation.. The God who inspires people to kill is a man-made-construct as is religion. Many in the West rejoice at the passing of religion. I have argued that it is not religion which creates violence but rather the other way round. Violence is a feature of humanity. The West's current fantasy that secularism can replace religion has led to the return of religion in its most belligerent form.

We in the secular West are loosing the values drawn from our Judeo-Christian heritage. We now worship the idols of self; the market, consumerism, individualism, self-fulfilment. We are losing the richness of a faith which once inspired reverence, altruism and public service. In our contemporary culture of hedonism, relativism and emptiness is it surprising that some your radicals eager to change the world turn to a fundamentalist religion which promise community, purpose and meaning?

I began this lecture by commenting on the challenge of the book of Judges. I have to ask is there any message of hope in that terrible book about killing in the name of God? [Clinton McCann in his commentary](#) says:

[The book of Judges is a warning, but the warning is grounded in hope...the book of Judges is not the end of the story. God will try again to establishing and through human beings and human structures the justice, righteousness and peace... and God is trying still.](#)²⁰

²⁰ Clinton McCann, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Judges*; Westminster John Knox Press 2011, p.8.

The long and tortuous book of Judges is followed by the tiny book of Ruth. There are deaths in this book but no killing. It is about generosity and hospitality to the outsider. The book of Ruth is a story of how gracious acts can plant the seeds of hope for future generations. One day killing in the name of God will be replaced by loving in the name of God.

NOTE (sections in blue omitted to reduce 40 minute lecture to 30 minutes)

Gillingham Lecture 24th February 2016